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## Article

# National, Regional, or Just Catholic?—Dilemmas of Church Art in a German–Polish Borderland. Upper Silesia, 1903–1953

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**Abstract:** The rise of nationalism threatened the integrity of the Catholic milieu in borderlands such as Prussian Upper Silesia. Facing this challenge, the ecclesiastical elite developed various strategies. This article presents interpretations of sacred art works from the first half of the 20th century, which reveal different approaches to national discourses expressed in iconographic programs. The spectrum of attitudes includes indifference, active counteraction to the progress of nationalism by promoting a different paradigm of building temporal imagined communities, acceptance of nationalistic metaphysics, which assumes the division of humanity into nations endowed with a unique personality, and a synthesis of Catholicism and nationalism, in which national loyalties are considered a Christian duty. The last position proved particularly expansive. Based on the primordialist concept of the nation and the historiosophical concept of Poland as a bulwark of Christianity, the Catholic-national ideology gained popularity among the pro-Polish clergy in the inter-war period. This was reflected in Church art works, which were to present Catholicism as the unchanging essence of the nation and the destiny of the latter resulting from God's will. This strategy was designed to incorporate Catholic Slavophones into the national community. The adoption of a different concept of the nation by the pro-German priests associated with the Centre Party—with a stronger emphasis on the subjective criteria of national belonging—resulted in greater restraint in expressing national contents in sacred spaces.



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**Keywords:** sacred art; Catholicism; nationalism; borderlands; Silesia

## 1. Introduction

The emergence of nationalism in the modern age and establishing national communities have posed serious challenges to the Roman Catholic Church. According to Adrian Hastings, who assumes both phenomena pre-modern existence, 'The nation and nationalism are both [...] characteristically Christian things [...]'. (Hastings 2004, p. 437). He adds, however, that the 'Catholic tradition under papal influence has always veered towards a universalist dimension to the structuring of society, opposed to absolutist claims of national sovereignty' (Hastings 2004, p. 449). Moreover, although 'the Catholic Church has in practice often under-girded nationalism [...], there are limits to its national enthusiasm, at least within areas effectively influenced by the papacy' (Hastings 2004, p. 450; for an overview on the theories of nationalism and religion, see Zubrzycki 2006, pp. 18–23). This diagnosis indicates a tension within the Catholic milieu caused by the development of modern imagined communities, demanding absolute loyalty from their declared and potential members, the effects of which were particularly significant in multi-ethnic borderlands. One such region was Upper Silesia, located in the eastern part of the Kingdom of Prussia and undergoing intensive modernization processes in the 19th century.

At the threshold of the 20th century, the Prussian Upper Silesia, whose inhabitants, according to the 1910 census, were 90.6% Catholic, 53% Polish, and 40% German speakers, became the scene of a growing national conflict. The supra-ethnic mobilization against Chancellor Bismarck's anti-church policy in the 1870s gave way to the rivalry between the Centre Party, representing the political Catholicism, and the increasingly strong Polish

camp and German nationalist parties. The Great War, the fall of the German Empire, and the establishment of the Polish nation-state gave the issue of Upper Silesia an international dimension. The plebiscite organized under the auspices of the League of Nations did not prevent the escalation of violence. Given the voting defeat and the French peacekeeping troops' passive attitude, Polish paramilitary units, unofficially supported by the government in Warsaw, took up most of the disputed area, retreating only under pressure from the German counter-attack. The division of the territory, made in 1922, turned out to be beneficial for Poland. As a result of the German aggression in 1939, the eastern part of Upper Silesia was incorporated into the Third Reich. After its collapse, almost the entire region found itself within the borders of Soviet-dominated Poland (Bahlcke et al. 2015).

Each of the above-mentioned changes was a challenge for the ecclesiastical elite in the region. Historical turns required negotiating positions in the new power system and redefining attitudes towards dominant and minority identity discourses. National tensions threatened to disintegrate parish communities and the entire Catholic milieu. Being aware of these dangers, priests could counteract the progress of nationalism or, in the case of those committed to one of the political camps, be cautious in using imagery in sacred spaces as a vehicle for national discourses. This article attempts to answer the question: how was church art used to establish and manifest permanent national loyalties or protect the faithful from nationalistic pressure in a linguistically diverse but mostly Catholic community?

The nationalization of Upper Silesians and the local Catholic clergy's attitude towards nationalist projects has already been discussed at length (Bjork 2008; Michalczyk 2010), but the problem of using church art for or against nationalism has usually remained on the margins of reflection. In recent years, it has been researched by the author of this article, the results being presented in Polish in several partial studies, focused on individual objects (Gorzeliński 2016; Gorzeliński 2017; Gorzeliński 2019), and in a newly issued monograph (Gorzeliński 2020). Their conclusions, supplemented by interpretations of additional sources, have been combined in the presented text in a picture of evolving persuasive strategies and different perceptions of community, depending on the views of elites and the attitudes of the masses subjected to ideologists' efforts. Upper Silesia has been treated as a case study of the complicated relationship between Catholicism and nationalism. The argument was organized by the opposition of the two divergent paths followed by Catholic circles challenged by national ideologies.

This study is arranged in chronological order. The analyzed period begins with the Polish radicalism's first success—1903 Wojciech Korfanty won over the Centre Party's candidate in the by-election to the Reichstag. It ends with the Polish Primate's arrest, Father Stefan Wyszyński, in which a dispute between the Church and the communist authorities culminated. The following chapters present interpretations of works of art created during the German Empire, in Polish and German Upper Silesia between world wars and actions taken after the Third Reich's aggression on Poland and in the first post-war years. In the Section 6, the discussed iconographic programs are confronted with the identity discourses conducted in the region and the nation's promoted concepts.

## 2. Language, Custom, Nationality Are Merely Robes

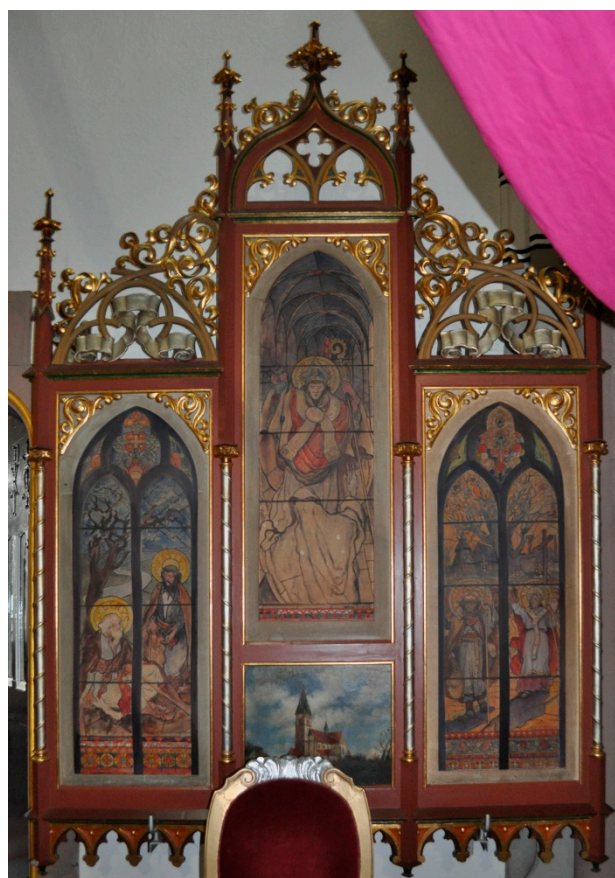
In 1901, a young Upper Silesian politician Wojciech Korfanty, associated with right-wing national democracy, published a brochure "Down with the Centre!"—a manifesto of Polish radicalism in the region. The author called for breaking the alliance, which was the legacy of common resistance against Chancellor Bismarck's anti-church and anti-Polish policy. As a result, there was not only electoral rivalry between the Polish movement and the Centre Party but also a rupture in the Upper Silesian clergy, which deepened until the 1921 plebiscite. Before the 1907 Reichstag elections, 245 priests expressed their support for the Centre Party, and only 14 for the Polish list (Fałęcki 2003, p. 31). Before the plebiscite, the number of pro-Polish clergymen was estimated at nearly a quarter (Trąba 2005, pp. 35–37).

In 1908, the leader of a small group of priests connected with the Polish movement, Aleksander Skowroński, born in a family of emigrants from the part of Poland under

the Russian partition, ordered from the Cracow painter and national activist Włodzimierz Tetmajer cartoons for three stained-glass windows (Figure 1) for the new parish church in Ellguth (Pol. Ligota Bialska)—a small village near Żülz (Pol. Biała Prudnicka) (Szramek 1936, p. 38). The fact that the Silesian parish priest gave the commission to an artist from the Polish lands was unique, and the exceptional significance ascribed to it by the clergyman was reflected in the display of cartoons in a specially prepared woodcarving frame in the presbytery. The church in Ellguth was dedicated, like the previous parish churches in the village, to St. Stanislaus the Bishop, the patron saint of Poland, which made it easier to include national meanings into the ideological program of painting decorations. Tetmajer presented a popular theme of Piotrowin's resurrection, according to a legend called by the bishop as a witness against the claims of his heirs, who demanded goods sold by the deceased to the diocese. As reported by a Skowronski's friend, an author of an article devoted to him, the clergyman interpreted the scene as "the resurrection of a nationality in the people of Silesia" (Szramek 1936, p. 38). The same source gives an interpretation of another scene—the conversation of Saints Peter and Paul. The painter repeated Guido Reni's composition, probably after the graphic owned by his client, bearing the following inscription: *quomodo gentes cogis judaizare?* (Gal. 2, 14). The words of St. Paul, expressing his opposition to Judaization as a condition for admitting pagans to the Church, were to be treated by Skowronski as his motto and a protest against the Germanization of Upper Silesians, which he accused some of the clergies of the diocese of Breslau (Pol. Wrocław). The third stained-glass window shows saints Cyril and Methodius among the crowd of peasants. The Apostles of the Slavs embody the ideal of the priesthood that respects "national personalities." This interpretation of their mission was referred to by Slavic nationalisms of the early 20th century. At that time, the wooden church, depicted in the background, behind the saints, was regarded as a typical element of the cultural landscape of Upper Silesia and an important testimony to its Slavic traditions. In the above-mentioned text, the tree accompanying the saints was called the "Slavic linden"—the term referring to a poem by a Polish poet Teofil Lenartowicz, where it symbolizes the Slavic lands that are regenerating and resisting German aggression (Szramek 1936, p. 38). The Slavic culture is also represented in ornamental motifs taken from the Cracow area's folk art and in Polish foundation inscriptions.

The themes and motives used by Tetmajer could have been interpreted within the framework of the Polish national discourse, but it certainly was not an obvious interpretation for the faithful. The perception of meanings constructed on the nationalistic ground required the priest's explanation, without which the stained-glass windows would be perceived on a purely religious level. The first attempt to introduce Polish content into the church's decor in Upper Silesia was therefore characterized by far-reaching restraint, probably resulting from the fear of reactions of the parishioners, who were unfamiliar with the symbolic universe, used in the lands that had been part of the pre-partition Poland. Skowronski's statements (Szramek 1936, p. 38) indicate that he was fully aware of the distance of the local community to the nationalistic project—nationality, that was understood in primordial terms, had yet to be "resurrected", using the authority of Saints Paul, Cyril, and Methodius and giving the cult of St. Stanislaus a national dimension (the problem of national indifference of the Upper Silesian Slavophones, who defined themselves neither as German nor as Poles, but as Upper Silesians, was discussed by Kamusella 2007; Bjork 2008; Michalczyk 2010; and Karch 2018).





**Figure 1.** Ligota Bialska (Ger. Ellguth), cartoons for stained-glass windows by Włodzimierz Table 1908. Used with permission from Ryszard Szopa.

Reinterpreting pre-modern symbols to incorporate them into the new system of beliefs that constituted discursively constructed imagined communities could serve not only nationalism but also the regional idea. In the years 1906–1908 in Königshütte (Pol. Królewska Huta, nowadays Chorzów), one of the largest cities of the industrial district in the eastern part of Upper Silesia, St. Hedwig's Church, erected over 40 years earlier, was extended. The local parish priest, an activist of the Centre Party, Fr Franz Tylla, ordered designs of the main altar and stained-glass windows for the presbytery from the painter Joseph Langer. As intended by the artist, the retable was crowned with a church's patroness statue. However, the stained-glass window in its background was significantly changed compared to the design—the Eye of Divine Providence inscribed in the triangle was replaced by the eagle of the Silesian Piasts and the initials S.H. (Sancta Hedwig) (Organisty 2002, p. 78). In this way, by emphasizing the role of the 13th-century duchess as the land's patroness, reference was made to the supra-ethnic, territorial community. Similarly, her figure was used in the Franciscan monastery complex, built between 1905 and 1907 in Panewnik (Pol. Panewniki) near Kattowitz (Pol. Katowice). In 1912, a monument to the saint was erected in the vicinity of the church, and the pedestal was decorated with an inscription in three language versions, Latin, German and Polish: Saint Hedwig, Patroness of Silesia and the Province of the Franciscan Fathers in Silesia—pray for us (Gierlotka 2013, p. 51).

The strategy of reconciling different language idioms within a single artistic structure was applied on a larger scale in the industrial settlement of Friedenshütte (now Nowy Bytom, part of the city of Ruda Śląska), where St. Paul's Church was erected in 1911–1912 according to a project by Johannes Franziskus Klomp (Głazek 1991; Czyżewska-Knap 2005a; Czyżewska-Knap 2005b). The building's facades and the equipment in its interior, designed by the architect, were covered with numerous inscriptions in three languages. Particularly

meaningful is a passage from the psalm in the portal above the main entrance, which ends with the verse: “The Lord is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens” (Ps 113, 4) (Figure 2). The Latin text is placed above the German and Polish versions, which are on the same level, thus subjecting the national idioms to the liturgical language’s symbolic domination. The idea of a bilingual community, united in the Church, permeating the building, is also manifested in the stained-glass windows, which show the saints and blessed venerated in Poland (Adalbert of Prague, Stanislaus) and Germany (Emperor Henry and his wife Kunegunda), as well as those from Upper Silesia (Hyacinth, Ceslaus, Bronislava). The architecture itself refers to the Ottonian, Salician, and Staufer dynasties’ times, recalling the “golden age” of the Christian empire. However, the crowning of the mighty tower was shaped similarly to the analogous element of the St. Elizabeth’s Church in Breslau (Pol. Wrocław), which at that time functioned as a symbol of the architectural traditions of Silesia (the motif was first used in modern architecture by Arthur Kickton in the design of St Paul’s Church in Breslau in 1907, which reflected the ideas of Heimatschutzbewegung, [Szymański-Störckuhl 1997](#)).



**Figure 2.** Ruda Śląska—Nowy Bytom (Ger. Friedenshütte), main portal of the Saint Paul’s Church, 1911–1912. Created by author.

The church in Friedenshütte is a complex statement on the hierarchy of values around which, from the point of view of political Catholicism, a temporal community should be organized. Accepting the metaphysics of nationalism, which assumes the division of mankind into nations with their own personality expressed in language, the authors of the ideological program put the Church, presented by means of sacred Latin, the state, symbolized by the imperial architecture, and the Silesian territorial community, represented by the characteristic motifs of the tower, above national loyalties. This program corresponds to the words of Bishop of Breslau, Georg von Kopp from 1903: “Language, custom, nationality are merely robes that people wear during the pilgrimage of a short life, but for all, there will come a day, and they will go to God, before whom the difference of language, nationality, and all earthly relations disappears” ([Kopp 1903](#)). It also echoes the dispute over the primacy of state and national rights between a group of Polish

activists connected with the Centre Party and the radicals gathered around Korfanty. Johannes Kapitza (Jan Kapica), who belonged to the first group, as early as 1917, in a pamphlet devoted to this problem, claimed that fidelity to the state is an absolute duty for a Catholic, i.e., independent of the interest of his own nationality (Kapitza 1917, p. 131). The strategy implemented in Friedenshütte suited the interests of mining and steel companies employing mainly Slavic-speaking workers and German technical staff. The companies' owners and management were interested in social stabilization and the soothing of ethnic tensions, which the Church could help with.

The cases presented above are exceptional examples of taking a stand on national discourses in church art in Upper Silesia in the first two decades of the 20th century. A single attempt to introduce Polish themes into sacral space, inspired by the art of Cracow, in Ellguth, a manifestation of respect for bilingualism within the ecclesiastical, state and regional community in Friedenshütte, and referring exclusively to the latter in Königshütte, determine the spectrum of attitudes that were demonstrated using visual means in places of Catholic worship. There was no German nationalist discourse in this range. Beyond this spectrum, the majority of church decorations remained completely "mute" from the national point of view, although at the same time they often adapted to the context resulting from the modernization process, e.g., through the selection of saint patrons of various professional groups active in the industrial part of the region. By means of images, the believers were addressed more willingly as miners or steelworkers than Germans or Poles.

### 3. What "Corresponds to the Feelings of a Pole"

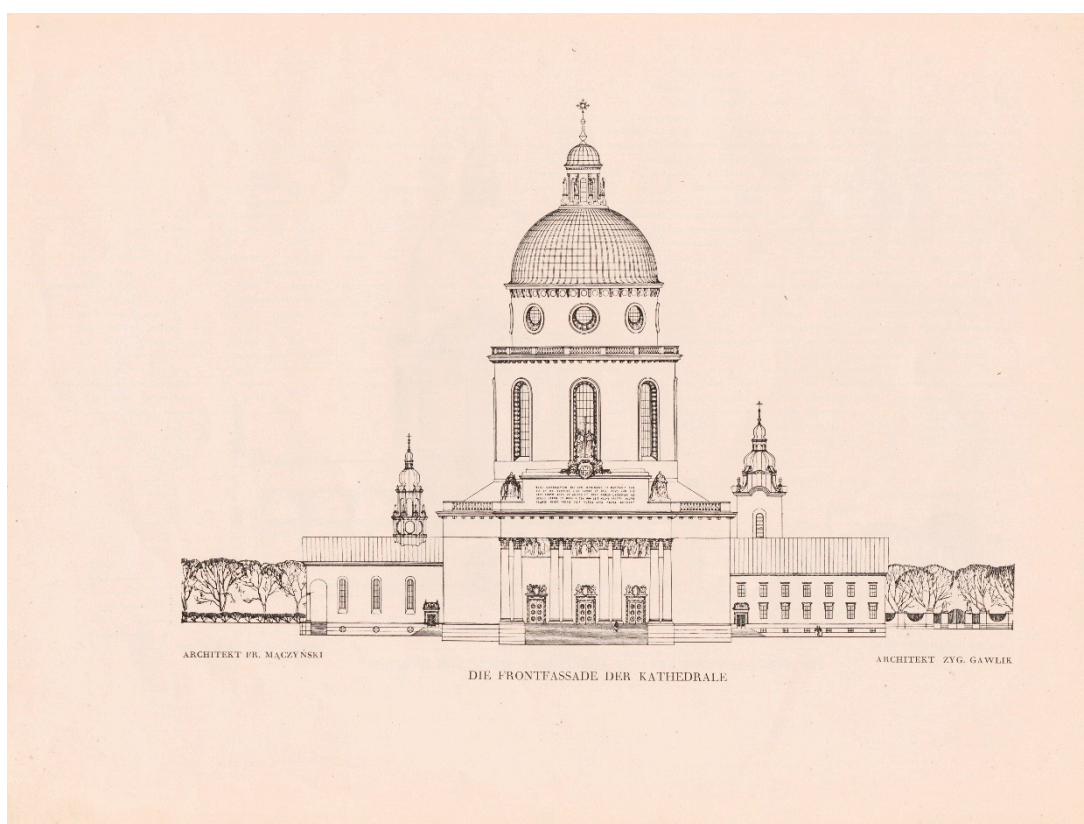
The German–Polish conflict over the region in 1919–1921 involved the Upper Silesian clergy, which played a significant role on both sides of the dispute. Priests delivered speeches at rallies, published polemical writings, but they were forbidden to agitate while performing priestly functions. Following the plebiscite, the prominent representatives of both factions issued unanimous appeals for peace. However, soon afterwards, the pro-Polish priests supported the armed irredenta. The division of the plebiscite territory led to the establishment, in its part granted to Poland, of an apostolic administration, and then a diocese with a center in Katowice, the capital of the Silesian Voivodship—the only autonomous province of the Second Republic of Poland. This meant the advancement of the part of the clergy involved on the Polish side, which filled key positions in the new church structure. However, priests with a non-Polish identity continued to serve in the Katowice diocese, and bilingual services were maintained in both parts of the divided region. This was the target of attacks by radical nationalist circles, which intensified in Poland after the coup d'état of 1926 and the seizure of power by Marshal Piłsudski's political camp, and in Germany, after the National Socialists came to power in 1933 (Michalczyk 2010).

The new diocese organization was associated with the competition for the design of the cathedral, that was decided to be dedicated to Christ the King. This could be considered a tribute to Pope Pius XI who was the Apostolic Nuncio in Warsaw during the difficult time of the Polish-Bolshevik war, and who discussed the subject of Christ's social reign in his encyclical 'Quas primas' published in December 1925, turning its blade against secularism. The document, which established the relevant feast, stressed the need to reconcile nations, which would be a blessed effect of the Savior's spiritual reign.

The project of the young architect from Cracow, Zygmunt Gawlik, was selected for implementation after a competition that was held back in 1924 (Figure 3), for which several renowned artists submitted their proposals rejected by the church authorities as too modern (Chojacka 1983; Burno 2012, pp. 76–78, 215–18). The aversion to avant-garde forms went hand in hand with a desire to create a spectacular symbol of Polishness. As the author of an article about the competition wrote in a professional periodical, the building was to "testify to our eternal rights to the Silesian land" (Kulczyński 1925, p. 7). This goal did not raise any objections among the Polish elite, but the way it was achieved caused controversy. The forms of simplified Classicism combined with Baroque elements, applied by Gawlik



and the experienced Franciszek Mączyński who supported him, were found by many to be shallow and imitative.



**Figure 3.** Katowice (Ger. Kattowitz), design of the cathedral by Zygmunt Gawlik. From *Der Kattowitzer Dom*. 1927. Krakau: W.L. Anczyc.

The architecture of the Katowice building, which refers to St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, and at the same time to the Renaissance and Baroque historical styles perceived as rooted in Polish tradition, set a counterpoint for the Gothic cathedral in Breslau (Czechowicz 2005, pp. 233–34). The emancipation of Eastern Upper Silesia from the jurisdiction of the bishops of Breslau who were accused of Germanizing tendencies took place in a tense atmosphere, and naming the Ordinary of the newly established diocese of Katowice the 'first Silesian bishop' had an overtone delegitimizing effect on the recent head of the Upper Silesian priests and caused protests of the German clergy (Myszor 2019, pp. 102–4).

The idea of returning to the Slavic roots after a period of German influence, considered unfavorable to spiritual development, was to permeate the cathedral's facade, the sculptural decoration of which was entrusted to the renowned Polish artist Xawery Dunikowski (Gorzeliński 2017). According to the project, which was not realized for financial reasons, the Saints Cyril and Methodius sculptures, flanked by groups of "Silesian people" and "Silesian knights," should have been placed on the axis at the top of the facade. As Fr Skowroński did two decades earlier, the diocesan authorities decided to use the figures of the Apostles of the Slavs, who were much more popular among pro-Polish oriented clergy than among all the faithful in the region. The local Catholic press promoted the idea that the Christianization of Silesia was the work of the missionaries from Thessaloniki or their pupils who were active in the Great Moravia. The adoption of Christianity from the south allowed the region's inhabitants to maintain their language and 'national character' and avoid dependence on Germans who used religion instrumentally to expand their sphere of influence—that was the core message delivered by numerous articles (Kozielek 1922, p. 12).



The iconographic program of the façade decoration was probably influenced not only by the anti-German aspect of the Saints Cyril and Methodius cult but also by the idea of uniting the Slavs under the auspices of the Holy See, which was then associated with the missionaries. It was the leading theme of Unionist conventions in Velehrad, Moravia, which were also attended by pro-Polish priests from Upper Silesia. After the Great War, it became part of the papal policy in which the Church in Poland played a decisive role. Pius XI hoped that the expected imminent collapse of Bolshevism in Russia would result in a religious revival that would establish unity with Rome. The eastern borderlands of the Polish state, inhabited by a large Orthodox population, were to become a testing ground for an experiment known as the Neo-Union, which aimed at subjugating Eastern Christians to the sovereignty of the Pope while maintaining the distinctiveness of their religious custom (Mysiek 1987, p. 111). The idea of the unique mission of the ‘Polish Catholic people’ as the ‘gate through which the Catholic spirit will flow to the east’ was articulated in 1920 in a brochure by one of the prominent Upper Silesian priests, who were agitating for Poland (Kubina 1920, pp. 78–79). The planned decoration of the cathedral façade was probably meant to manifest support for the ambitious goals of papal politics, in which the Polish clergy was assigned a key role.

Deciphering a significant part of the content that was presented above and associating the architectural forms of the cathedral and the sculptural decoration of the facade with the Polish national discourse required the knowledge of the meanings constructed in the Polish Catholic press or school textbooks, without which the reception would have remained on the elementary, religious level. The message was therefore addressed to Upper Silesian Slavophones. By demonstrating close links between Polishness and Catholicism, attempts were made to integrate them into the national community.

A similar persuasive strategy was adopted by Father Emil Szramek, who supervised the construction of the cathedral and administered the parish of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which covered the major part of Katowice, and who played an important role in the cultural and scientific life of the Silesian Voivodeship (Bednorz and Bańka 1966). In the paintings of the Marian cycle, he commissioned from Józef Unierzyski in Krakow—Regina Pacis (1928) (Figure 4), Homage of Upper Silesia (Figure 5), Virgin Most Powerful (Figure 6) (both 1931)—the Mother of Christ was shown as the Queen of the Polish Crown Gorzelik 2016). This title, which dates back to the vows made by King John Casimir in 1656 in the face of the Swedish threat, appeared in the Polish press but was not mentioned in a brochure published by Szramek in German and Polish versions (Szramek 1935).



**Figure 4.** Józef Unierzyski, Regina Pacis, painting in the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Katowice, 1928. Used with permission from the Museum of Katowice History.



**Figure 5.** Józef Unierzyski, Homage of Upper Silesia, painting in the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Katowice, 1931. Used with permission from the Museum of Katowice History.



**Figure 6.** Józef Unierzyski, Virgin Most Powerful, painting in the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Katowice, 1931. Used with permission from the Museum of Katowice History.

The canvases must have surprised the faithful with secular, national symbolism, unprecedented in Upper Silesian churches. In the first two paintings, the figures gather in front of the throne of Mary holding flags with the emblems of Upper Silesia and Poland, which was to indicate the region's communion with the "Motherland." A similar message is conveyed by a group flanking the Queen of Peace: professors from the University of Cracow, soldiers in Polish uniforms, a king recommended by a Pope on the one side, and Upper Silesian people, and young intelligentsia on the other. The image of the regional community was expanded in the Homage of Upper Silesia. At the foot of the Madonna and Child, there are the representatives of the pro-Polish part of the local clergy among women and girls wearing folk costumes, workers, and a few townspeople. The almost ostentatious proximity of the clergy and the people to whose "authentic" culture, pro-Polish priests,



unlike the “Germanizers,” remained faithful, legitimizes their position in the new diocese. Their spiritual leadership is manifested in the roles that in the traditional religious painting were assigned primarily to saints—the bishop of Katowice presents a model of the cathedral to Maria and her Son, Father Teodor Kubina, Szramek’s predecessor as the administrator of the Katowice parish points out the gathered believers with a recommending gesture.

The third painting illustrates one of the key historiosophical concepts of Polish Catholic-national ideology—*Antemurale Christianitatis*. Mary and the Child surrounded by angels descend from the ramparts of Jasna Góra, the main Polish Marian sanctuary, which became famous for its defense against the Swedes in 1655, towards the figures of the enemies of the Church and Poland huddled on the ground—the Muslims Turk and Tatar, a Protestant Swede and a Bolshevik. The defense of the Catholic faith was presented as a destiny of the nation, particularly beloved by the Mother of Christ. The bulwark mission was updated in the war against Soviet Russia in 1920—the decisive battle of Warsaw was called the ‘Miracle on the Vistula,’ and the triumph of Polish troops was attributed to the intervention of the Madonna.

The above-mentioned set of paintings is a multi-threaded statement about Upper Silesian–Polish relations. Both groups are united on the ground of their common faith. The Upper Silesians, led by the priests who are faithful to the people, join the great stream of Polish history, bringing in hard work, and, above all, true religiousness, gaining in return a share in the unique mission to which the Polish nation was called. Even if the whole message was not clear to all believers, the idea of the relationship between Upper Silesia and Poland was expressed clearly and distinctly using commonly recognizable symbols.

National motifs appeared in the decorations of numerous churches of the diocese of Katowice—they were mostly images of “Polish” saints, but there were also examples of using national symbols. However, many places of worship remained completely neutral in this respect. In most cases, it is difficult to decide whether this was due to the aversion to nationalism or to the belief that combining religious and national agendas would be inappropriate. Light is shed on some of the clergy’s attitudes by the correspondence between the parish priest from Orzesze (Ger. Orzesche), a small locality near the industrial district, and the Katowice curia. In 1926, Father Józef Kulig started a project of building a new church, which he had already intended to do ten years earlier. The diocesan authorities raised objections to the submitted Neo-Romanesque design by a local builder that referred to the beginning of the century’s sacral architecture. Kulig was aware of this form’s anachronism, but as he explained, he chose the project because of the lack of funds for “modern building styles.” That is why he avoided the “superfluous architecture”, accepting a minimum fragmentation so that the building did not look “like a barn” (Gorzelik 2020, p. 157). The Curia questioned the project referring to the opinion of an expert—a builder from Katowice who wrote: “The façade is good, in the Romanesque style, does not correspond to the feelings of a Pole,” and further on: “Let’s compare churches in Poland, and we will note that they are mostly executed in the light Baroque or Renaissance style, and therefore it is recommended to build new churches in these styles” (Gorzelik 2020, p. 156).

The parson, who at no stage in the dispute mentioned the architectural forms’ national symbolism, was finally permitted to build according to the proposed plan (Figure 7). The controversy did not involve Polish nationalist organizations operating in the parish, which had conflicted with the clergyman since he refused to take part in the ceremony of consecrating the monument to Polish insurgents in 1923, explaining that, in the opinion of many Catholics, the uprising cannot be ethically justified (Gorzelik 2020, p. 155). The priest also consistently resisted the demands for abolishing German services, arguing that this would threaten to drain the faithful into the Protestant church. In 1925, the bishop of Katowice listed Father Kulig among German priests, and in police reports, he was described as disloyal to the Polish state (Kłakus 2013, p. 179; Myszor 1999, p. 111).

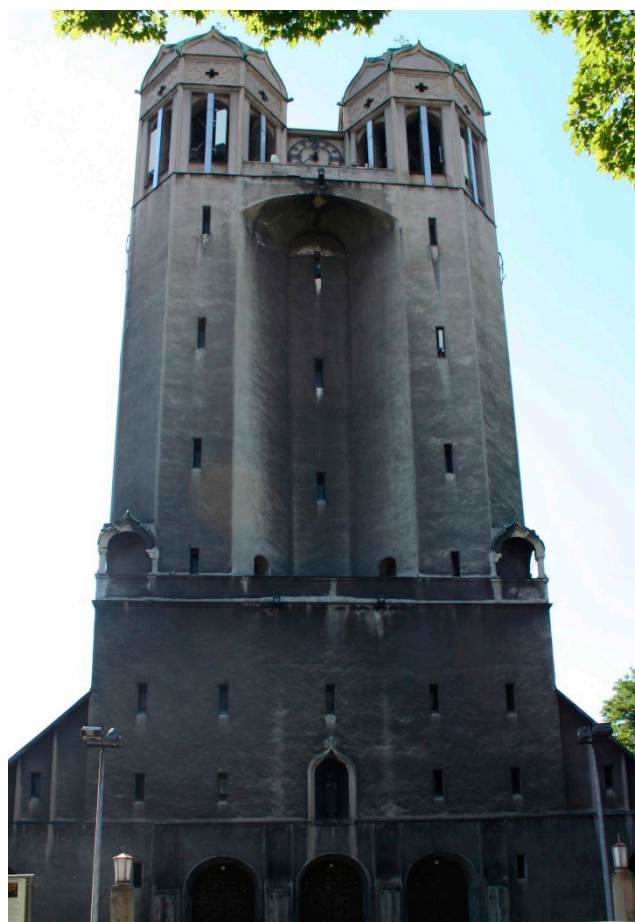




**Figure 7.** Orzesze (Ger. Orzesche), Church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary designed by Teofil Wygasz, 1926–1930. Created by author.

#### 4. “Mein Reich Is nicht von dieser Welt”

In the German part of the region, where, until the dismantling of the republican system of government, the power was held by a coalition of democratic forces led by the Centre Party, which supported the priests who were attacked, as in the diocese of Katowice, by radical nationalists for maintaining bilingual pastoral care, the national discourse was visible in sacred interiors much less frequently than in Poland. Here too, however, symptoms of radicalization of the faithful appeared. Their most spectacular artistic manifestation is St. Barbara’s Church in Beuthen (Pol. Bytom) in the industrial district, which served the community that consisted largely of emigrants from the nearby Królewska Huta that had been granted to Poland. The building was designed by the renowned architect Arthur Kickton from Potsdam in moderately modernist forms and consecrated in 1931 (Figure 8). Abandoning the traditional orientation of the church—turning it to the east, towards the nearby Polish border with a massive two-tower façade, pierced with small windows resembling shooting holes—gave it a character, as a researcher of modernist architecture in Silesia put it, of a “concrete “bastion,” which was directed less against secularization tendencies, and more against the “Slavic invasion” (Störtkuhl 2013, pp. 284–85). The Beuthen building was a counterpoint for the two-tower church in Piekary Śląskie (Ger. Deutsch Piekar), located not far away but on the other side of the border—the main pilgrimage center of the Katowice diocese, which was given a Polish character. Its confrontational dimension was unique in the Upper Silesian part of the diocese of Breslau. Comparable ostentation can be probably noticed in a sketch by Dominikus Böhm that presents a vision to expand the sanctuary on the St. Anne’s Mountain (Ger. Sankt Annaberg, Pol. Góra św. Anny), where the German–Polish struggle for Upper Silesia culminated in 1921, interpreted by some researchers as a project to give the complex the character of a national shrine, inspired by the monument of the Battle of Tannenberg in East Prussia (Störtkuhl 2013, p. 281). However, there is no indication that the Church was interested in this idea.



**Figure 8.** Bytom (Ger. Beuthen), Saint Barbara's Church designed by Arthur Kickton, 1928–1931. Created by author.

In the decor and equipment of the St. Barbara's Church in Beuthen, completed in the 1930s and 1940s, the German inscriptions were used which meant departing, as it often happened in Polish Upper Silesia, from nationally neutral Latin. During the Nazi rule, the "Germanization" of a place of worship carried out in this way may have been considered as mimicry and conceal the desire to preserve bilingual pastoral care. Such intentions could have inspired the priest of a rural parish in Groß-Schmnitz (Pol. Zimnice Wielkie), who was attacked by the Nazis for Polonophilic tendencies. However, according to the Polish minority press, the clergyman was a declared supporter of the Centre Party and stood for Germany before the plebiscite (Karch, pp. 221–22). In his report for the curia, the parson pointed out that the vast majority (99%) of his parishioners needed a mass with a sermon in Polish (Golachowski 1950, p. 38). However, when the church was expanded in 1934, the mysteries of the rosary were written in German on the ceiling beams.

This case shows how difficult it was to navigate through the reefs of national radicalism for the priests who defended the right of the faithful to pastoral care in Polish and who indicated that for many Upper Silesians, this was a traditional language of prayer and not an expression of political attitude. An example of determination to maintain the course resulting from the tradition of the Centre Party in Upper Silesia is a group of churches erected on the initiative of Father Josef Kubis, who administered the Holy Cross parish in Oppeln (Pol. Opole), the capital of the Upper Silesian Province established in 1919. In the plebiscite campaign, the clergyman got involved on the German side. After the region's division, he was sometimes targeted by the Polish press, which described him as a "fierce enemy of Polishness" (Hitze 2002, p. 1001). During the Third Reich, these attacks coincided with the Sicherheitsdienst report, in which Kubis was denounced as "polenfreundlich" and guilty of anti-German actions (Hitze 2002, p. 1132). In January 1939, he was one of the

authors of a letter to the regional Nazi authorities in defense of bilingual pastoral ministry ([Hitze 2002](#), pp. 1173–75).

In the years 1923–1924, under Fr. Kubis's auspices, a project of St. Peter and Paul's Church in Oppeln, delivered by Arthur Kickton, was implemented. The government provided financial support from the Eastern Aid (Osthilfe), a fund dedicated to the eastern provinces, and so did Pope Pius XI, who before the plebiscite resided as a nuncio in the capital of Upper Silesia. The building has been given moderately modern forms that clearly referred to the tradition—mainly to the architecture of the Ottonian times and the shape of the crowning of a single tower, to an iconic example of Silesian architecture—St. Elizabeth's Church in Breslau. The bond with the Holy See was emphasized by placing a papal coat of arms in the facade ([Störtkuhl 2013](#), p. 283).

In the following years, under Fr. Kubis's supervision, work was carried out on the interior design and equipment. It has retained a clearly nationally neutral character, manifested, among others, by the consistent use of Latin inscriptions—German appeared only in small foundation inscriptions in stained-glass windows. On Christmas 1930, the main altar was consecrated—the work of artists associated with "Ostdeutsche Werkstätten für christliche Kunst und Kunstgewerbe" in Neisse (Pol. Nysa). A huge crucifix with the image of the triumphant Savior was placed on a multi-stage foundation with relief images of the church's patrons on the sides. The whole was crowned by a monumentalized papal tiara's motif, adorned in the front with the inscription REGEM REGUM—VENITE ADOREMUS ([Wessinghage-Okon 2001](#), pp. 29–31). The altar's ideological program is inspired by the feast of Christ the King established by Pius XI, which also influenced the patronage of the cathedral in Katowice. However, while in the Polish part of the region, the manifestation of the relationship with Rome is combined with national discourse elements, in Opole, the encyclical 'Quas primas' was fully interpreted in the spirit of Catholic universalism.

The intermediate position between the lofty silence on national matters, filling the space of St. Peter and Paul's Church in Oppeln, and the aggressive message of the fortress-like building in Bytom is occupied by the decoration of the Christ the King Church in Gliwicz (Pol. Gliwice) in the industrial district. In 1937, there were 20 round stained-glass windows installed in the aisles, supplied by Franz Mayer's company from Munich ([Komar 2010](#)). Among the saints shown are the patron saints of miners and workers—St. Barbara and St. Joseph respectively, the patron saint of Germany—St. Boniface, who was not popular in Silesia (there was only one church dedicated to him in the whole land), as well as other "German" saints—Bruno of Cologne and Elisabeth of Thuringia. There are also figures connected with the region—the role of St. Hedwig as the patron saint of the land is emphasized by a shield with the Silesian eagle on it, and St. Hyacinth from Upper Silesia is depicted as well (Figure 9). The presence of the latter deserves special attention. In the Polish part of the region, this saint proclaimed a patron of the diocese of Katowice, symbolized, because of his connections with Cracow, where he was active and buried, communion with Poland. Pro-Polish priests, such as the aforementioned Fr. Szramek, even suggested that German intrigues caused his only limited popularity ([Szramek 1934](#), pp. 78–79). Meanwhile, the beginnings of the revival of the cult of this Dominican saint date back to the end of the 19th century, when, at the request of the Bishop of Breslau, who followed the expectations of the clergy and the faithful, the Pope raised the rank of his memorial ([Chrzyszcz 1897](#), pp. 54, 56). This act should be associated with the Upper Silesian people's emancipation, who increasingly manifested their separate, confessionally underpinned identity within the Silesian Province. After the land had been divided, in its German part, the saint remained a regional symbol—in a brochure from 1926 dedicated to St. Hyacinth's Church in Roßberg (Pol. Rozbark) near Beuthen, the patron saint was described as "a compatriot of the Upper Silesian people" ([Kytzia 1926](#), p. 4). The iconography of stained-glass windows in Gliwicz indicates that these people, represented by both Duchess Hedwig of Bavaria and Slavophone Hyacinth, were incorporated into the German community that stood under the patronage of St. Boniface. The fact that the



faithful were addressed as Germans was also expressed in the language of inscriptions. The image of Christ in the presbytery, which was painted in 1938, was accompanied by the words: “Mein Reich ist nicht von dieser Welt” (John 18, 36). Therefore, the message of the church’s decoration was directed against Nazi secularized millenarism, with its idea of a “Thousand Years Reich” established here and now and against an exclusive vision of Volksgemeinschaft defined in racial terms.



**Figure 9.** Saint Hyacinth, stained-glass window in the Christ the King Church in Gliwice (Ger. Gleiwitz), 1937. Created by author.

### 5. Polish Devotion: “[...] More Patriotic, National”

In 1939, the bilingual pastoral ministry was suspended in the Republic of Poland and then in the Third Reich under the increasing pressure of national radicalism. The German aggression against Poland resulted in some of the pro-Polish priests’ death—among them, Fr Emil Szramek was murdered in the concentration camp. The Nazi authorities also repressed clergy who were once associated with the Centre Party. In the occupied areas of the Silesian Voivodeship, incorporated into the Reich, it was recommended to remove from public space the images of Our Lady of Częstochowa who had been worshipped in Upper Silesia for centuries; however, in the interwar period was used by the pro-Polish priests as a national symbol and proof of the region’s eternal Polishness (Polak-Springer 2015, p. 161). The interference of the Nazis also affected the decoration of churches. In Königshütte, a stained-glass window with a white eagle’s image was ordered to be removed, despite the parson’s explanation that it was an attribute of John the Evangelist, not a Polish emblematic bird (Polak-Springer 2015, p. 161). In the Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Katowice, the parish priest ordered Polish inscriptions to be overpainted, probably expecting them to be the cause of the destruction of the stained-glass windows that they decorated (Pyka 1992–1993, p. 315). The practices used by the Nazis were to continue after the end of the war, but this time they focused on the symbols associated with German national discourse.

As a consequence of the Third Reich fall, almost the entire former Prussian Upper Silesia found itself under Polish state and church administration. By a decision of the Polish Primate August Hlond, Bishop of Katowice in 1925–1926, which was not authorized by the Pope, the Apostolic Administration of Opole Silesia was established in the region’s part that had belonged to Germany before the outbreak of the war. It was headed by Fr Bolesław Kominek, who, like Hlond, came from the eastern part of Upper Silesia. As a result of the Shoah and the eastern border change, the Polish state experienced national

and religious homogenization on an unprecedented scale. Upper Silesia underwent similar processes, where the policy of the new authorities, dominated by the communists, was calculated to eliminate the Germans and polonize the nationally indifferent population (Madajczyk 2014, pp. 200–1). The Polish Church generally supported these goals but questioned how the national policy was implemented, especially using the classification of the population made by the Nazis in the occupied Silesian Voivodship. It should be added that the post-war verification of nationality also affected the clergy—many priests were displaced or left the region for fear of persecution (Dziurok 2012, pp. 524–31).

The relocated indigenous inhabitants of Upper Silesia were replaced by Polish people from areas lost to the USSR and the country's central part. This posed new challenges to the Church, especially in the western part of the region. Catholicism was potentially the main platform for social integration; however, it was hindered by different piety models practiced by Upper Silesians and newcomers. The apostolic administrator tried to reduce the resulting tensions: "We explained to them [the Silesians—author's reminder] from the pulpits and at parish meetings that the newcomers are also Catholics and devotees of the Blessed Virgin Mary, that their church services are more patriotic, national. These two styles of religiosity, Polish and Silesian, should constantly be coming together and uniting" (Hanich 2015, p. 100). The interferences in church decorations in western Upper Silesia were justified similarly. Fr. Kominek personally ordered to remove German inscriptions and images that might have upset the Poles traumatized after the war experiences—especially the representations of men in German uniforms (Musialik 2014, p. 415). Such instructions were not always understood by the local clergy, who felt loyal to their parishioners—to the families who had often lost loved ones at the front and sought consolation in the church. The parish priest in Kłodnica (Ger. Kłodnitz) near Kędzierzyn (Ger. Kandrzin) ignored the Reverend Kominek's order to remove the figure of a soldier from the group gathered around the Pieta in the main altar retable, executed in Munich in 1942. Under pressure from the secular authorities, the priest decided to cover the sculpture with a sack. For fear of repression, he left the parish and went to Germany. The disputed statue was requisitioned, and the next parish priest put in its place a representation of a farmer (Jelitto and Pawluk).

The national purification of sacral interiors, which was also carried out in the St. Barbara's Church in Bytom and resulted in removing German inscriptions and mosaics, in the first post-war years did not entail the introduction of Polish motifs (Nadolski 2002, p. 96). In the Church of St. Peter and Paul in Opole, where the parish priest, who had held his office since 1936, ordered to supplement the pre-war polychromes, Latin was consistently used (Wessinghage-Okon 2001, pp. 107–8). The Catholic-national offensive of images was to take place after the crisis in relations between the Church and the State, which led to the banishment of the bishops from the diocese of Katowice in 1952 and to the internment of the primate in 1953. After the government and the Episcopate had achieved the agreement in 1956 and the preparations for the celebration of the Millennium of Polish Baptism had started, 'Polish' saints, national symbols, and historical scenes indicating the special place designated by Divine Providence for Poland in history, became present in sacred spaces on an unprecedented scale. The period of national purification was followed by the time of the memorial colonization.

## 6. One Region, Two Catholicisms

The examples presented above reveal the multitude of Catholic attitudes towards the discourses that construct modern imagined communities. The Church, which was the first to establish a lasting social network covering the whole of Prussian Upper Silesia, was due to its staff's linguistic competence, an efficient intermediary between Slavo- and Germanophones, as well as between the people and the upper classes (Karch 2018, pp. 23–57). This predisposed the clergy to play a special role in the organization of the mass society that was developing in the region and make them able to mobilize it against secularism that was personified by Chancellor Bismarck. Within the confessional paradigm of community-building, the metaphysics of nationalism was accepted, and its anthropology

was rejected. Most priests recognized the vision of humanity divided into nations whose personalities are expressed in language and custom while pushing national loyalties into the background. This position's most complete artistic expression was found in the Church of St. Paul in Friedenshütte (Pol. Nowy Bytom). In the pursuit of integration on the religious and regional ground, pre-modern symbols were also used in church art, such as the patroness of the land Saint Hedwig or Saint Hyacinth, whose cult, that had been previously of barely local range, can be seen as an "invented tradition." This "regionalization" of the saints was contrasted in the isolated case of Ellguth with their "nationalization" while referring to Cyril and Methodius's nationalistic interpretation, the saints not so far known in Upper Silesia. At the base of the stained-glass windows' ideological program was the primordial concept of a nation, linking national affiliation not with a subjective feeling but with origin and language.

Such positions, which were relatively rarely reflected in church art before the Great War—most of the sacred spaces did not contain references to modern imagined communities—were developed and clarified in the plebiscite campaign. The statements of priests connected with the Centre Party and the Polish national movement on the relationship between religion and nation and on the latter's nature were situated at opposite poles. The former denied nations the status of natural beings, questioned the right to self-determination, maintained that in the case of Upper Silesians, the national feeling was replaced by Catholicism, pointed to subjective criteria of national belonging, minimized the role of origin and language, and claimed that an opportunity for social advancement was a way to establish lasting national loyalty (Karch 2018, p. 135; Nieborowski 1919; Hitze 2002, p. 673). The latter used the rhetoric of "national awakening," they argued that Upper Silesian people are Poles and "will remain Poles even if they do not feel this way," because in this matter, "it is not a man's will or wishes that decide, but his nature, his origin, his blood," they considered the nations to be established by God, and the aspiration to unite with Poland to be a moral duty (Kubina 1920, pp. 28–29). They eliminated the tension between Catholicism and nationalist anthropology by claiming that there is no contradiction between loyalty to the Church and the nation because religion and nationality are like 'two blood sisters' (1923).

These fundamental differences determined the penetration of national content into sacred spaces after the plebiscite area division. The farther-reaching internalization of nationalist values by the pro-Polish clergy was a prerequisite for the wider use of church art as a tool of Upper Silesians' imaginative inclusion in the national community. In the churches of the diocese of Katowice, there were "Polish" saints depicted on an unprecedented scale and Mary, who was shown as the Queen of Poland, the motif of the Polish eagle and scenes indicating the nation's unique historical mission. The iconographic repertoire developed earlier in the Polish lands was enriched with regional elements—images of saints related to Silesia, heraldic motifs, or folk costumes, which were attributes of lower social strata and their "Polish" culture, uncontaminated by foreign influences. In this way, in the churches' decorations, the cult of "authenticity" was expressed, which, as Anthony D. Smith stresses, is the secular equivalent of Catholic holiness in the nationalist system of beliefs (Smith 2003, pp. 37–40). The faith in the moral obligations resulting from a national belonging that was defined in primordial terms led many priests who were involved in the Polish movement to use visual means to exert nationalizing pressure on nationally indifferent Slavophones, and even, as Szramek puts it, to 'regain the Germanised individuals' (Szramek 1934, p. 37).

Against this background, the national neutrality of most of the churches in the Upper Silesian part of the diocese of Breslau gains an almost ostentatious dimension. However, also here, there was a greater willingness than in the previous period to introduce nationalistic discourse elements into the sacred space or to establish symbolic German domination through the language. Such practices could be motivated not so much by the clergy's inner conviction about the need to shape permanent national loyalty among the faithful and to use church art for this purpose, but by the pressure from a radicalized environment that included some secular Catholics and, since 1933, also the state. An example of such



conformism is a letter from the parish priest of St Joseph's Church in Zabrze in the industrial district, addressed in 1942 to Dominikus Böhm. The author, who feared the faithful's reactions, especially of the young people, asked to soften the Semitic features of the Holy Family in the stained-glass window project (Chojecka 1999, p. 183).

The political changes of 1945 opened the Upper Silesian churches' doors to the Catholic narrative on the nation more widely than ever before. In the rural parishes of the western part of the land, inhabited mainly by autochthons, there is still a reticence, rare in other Polish regions, in using specific Polish-Catholic imagery: national motifs and religious symbols which have been given national significance. The area of religious 'purism,' which assumes the Church's autonomy from secular ideologies and the decoupling of Catholicism and nationalism, has, however, shrunk into small enclaves. Finally, we should return to the reflection of Adrian Hastings, who notes that the 'Catholic Christianity, understood in a wide sense, was both incarnationalist and universalist—it tended both to identify closely with particular communities, cultures and nations, and to insist upon a communion transcending such particularities' (Hastings 2004, p. 450). The example of Upper Silesia shows what dilemmas resulted from this ambivalence in the borderland, where Catholicism was the common denominator and priests identified themselves with different temporal communities.

## 7. Conclusions

The analyzed examples from a Central European borderland show to what extent church art, through which, as the believers saw it, spoke the authority of the institution, could be used to impose national loyalty on the faithful as a moral obligation derived from the religious premises or to shape the sacred space as a place of refuge from the growing nationalizing pressure and of supra-ethnic reconciliation. In Upper Silesia's case, this first attitude, inspired by the nation's primordialist concept, proved to be more expansive. This was due primarily to border shifts favorable to Poland. National-Catholic symbiosis was characteristic of Polish tradition from the second half of the 19th century, and national symbols were widely accepted in Polish church art around 1900 (for a detailed analysis of the evolving relationship between Catholicism and Polish nationalism, see Porter-Szűcs 2011). In the following decades, this unique relationship between Catholicism and Polish nationalism reached the level of theological reflection, resulting in developing the so-called theology of nation, combining Christian and nationalist anthropology in a risky balance (for an analysis of the nationalist anthropology, see Kedourie [1960] 1996, pp. 67–68). This affected creating national-Catholic imagery, which in Upper Silesia, more frequently than in other lands constituting the Polish state between the World Wars and after the World War II, absorbed some regional motifs.

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